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Anthropology

Stephen McGarvery on Global Health in Samoa

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Stephen McGarvey is the Director of the International Health Institute and Professor of Community Health and Anthropology at Brown University. In his lecture he discussed Public health in the Samoas, comparing the health patterns of American Samoa and non-American Samoa. He studies the genetic, physiologic and behavioral influences on obesity and cardio-vascular disease in these Oceania islands.

There are a multitude of causes and results of the increasing obesity levels. World War II brought better medicine to the Samoan Islands so mortality due to infectious diseases decreased. There is a changing economy that is becoming increasingly modern. The changing economy includes urbanization, technological changes, changes in leisure activities, mass media growth, and changes in food processing. With this increase in economic development, there is a correlation with a decrease in child stunting and an increase in adult obesity. McGarvey has noticed that in American Samoa obesity has increased at a much higher rate. It is result of the fact that things like fast food chains and cars have dominated society. Their dietary patterns have changed from traditional foods to a more modern diet. In American Samoa obesity is even reaching children. One question was whether or not these obesity patterns were due to the genetic disposition of Samoans to be overweight, but McGarvey argues that research shows that it is a behavioral problem more than anything else.

As both a doctor and an anthropologist, Stephen McGarvey is also an applied anthropologist because he is attempting to find a solution to the obesity problem in American Samoa. He questions how to change things and whether the problem can be solved by targeting the population as a whole or by gradually changing individual habits. He is trying to research and discover new methods of intervention to prevent non-communicable diseases, and American Samoa and Samoa are both targets of his studies.